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# THE CENSORSHIP OF THE STAGE IN ENGLAND.

BY G. BERNARD SHAW.

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IN England, no play may be publicly performed until a certificate has been procured from the Lord Chamberlain that it “does not in its general tendency contain anything immoral or otherwise improper for the stage.” The Lord Chamberlain, who must be distinguished from the hereditary Great Chamberlains of England, is not a democratic official. He has nothing to do with the great offices by which the British Empire is administered—such as the Home Office, the Colonial Office, the India Office, staffed by bureaucrats elected by competitive examination to posts which they hold irremovably, through all changes of government, under the command of the Secretary of State for their department, a cabinet minister resigning whenever his party, defeated in the House of Commons, goes out of office. He is only a member of the Queen’s household retinue—the Malvolio of St. James’ Palace—responsible to nobody but the Queen, and therefore really not responsible at all, because the Queen’s interference with the fantastic agglomeration of little dignities and functions which serve as excuses for the perquisites of her retinue, does not spread far beyond her presence and her residence (which is not St. James’ Palace), and is politically and conventionally limited even there.

The Lord Chamberlain does not condescend to read plays himself; and the Examiner of Plays, who does it for him, is perhaps the obscurest unit in the imposing procession of Pages of the Back Stairs, Pages of the Chambers, Pages of the Presence, Masters of the Music, Keepers of the Jewels, Keepers of the Swans, Gentleman Usher Daily Waiters, Gentlemen Usher Quarterly Waiters, Bargemasters, Grooms of the Privy Chamber, Gen-

lemen Ushers of Privy Chamber, and all the other breath-be-reaving retainers of whom only one, the Poet Laureate, has succeeded in imposing the fact of his existence on the consciousness of the British public. The Lord Chamberlain himself, with all this pageantry to superintend, has no time to keep any check on his subordinate, even if he could pretend to know anything more than he about dramatic criticism and the foundations of morality. The result is that the Examiner of Plays, humble, untitled, "middle-class" though he be, is yet the most powerful man in England or America. Other people may make England's laws; he makes and unmakes its drama, and therefore also the drama of America; for no American dramatic author can afford to defy a despot who can, by a nod, cut him off from an English stageright worth possibly \$20,000 in London alone. The monarchy is limited; the Cabinet, with tears of rage, cannot assert itself even against Anti-Vaccinators; the House of Lords, nominally omnipotent, puts down its foot only to emphasize the humiliation of having to take it up again; but the Examiner of Plays, greater than all these, does what he likes, caring not a dump for nations or constitutions, English or American. The President of the United States himself practically cannot see a new play with first getting the Examiner's leave.

It will be inferred that no pains are spared to secure the services of a very highly qualified and distinguished person to wield this astonishing power—say the holder of a University chair of Literature or Dramaturgy. The inference is erroneous. You are not allowed to sell stamps in an English post office without previously passing an examination; but you may become Examiner of Plays without necessarily knowing how to read or write. The post is held at present by one George Alexander Redford, said to have been a bank clerk, but not ascertained to have been anything except lucky enough to obtain a place at court with a salary of some fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars a year, and powers to exact from every author or manager producing a new play five dollars and a quarter for each one-act piece, and ten dollars and a half for each piece of two or more acts.

The resultant income must not be estimated merely by the number of English plays whose fame reaches the United States. In England the law of dramatic copyright, or stageright, is mere madness and confusion. Not long ago a popular novelist an-

nounced for performance a stage version of one of his books. He was promptly warned that his version was an infringement of the stageright of a version already made by a sharp country solicitor, and duly licensed by the Examiner of Plays and performed. The author had actually to buy back the stageright of his own story from the pirate who had stolen a march on him. In such a state of affairs, every prudent novelist whose book contains valuable dramatic material takes the precaution to put together some sort of stage version, no matter how brief or inept, and to have it furtively performed at a suburban hall with a theatrical license, the actors being a few friends who read their parts anyhow, and the audience a single confederate who complies with the law by paying for his seat. The price of admission is prohibitive to the casual student of the bill on the door—usually about five dollars and a quarter.

Further, the English stageright in a play is forfeited if the play is performed first in America. Consequently, the first thing a dramatic author has to do, when his play is not written for immediate production in England, is to give a copyrighting performance of the kind described above. The dramatic authors and the novelists between them thus keep up a series of theatrical performances of which the public knows nothing, but upon every one of which the Examiner of Plays levies his ten dollars and a half. What is more, these freaks of the law of copyright greatly increase his power, since not only the performance of the play in England, but the acquisition of valuable property rights elsewhere, is made dependent on his pleasure.

There is another way in which the Examiner can increase his emoluments. Formerly, if a play was susceptible of amendment, the Examiner specified the lines to which he objected, suggesting additions to alter the complexion of the moral situation in the play, and even altering expressions which were against his rules: for example, changing "as drunk as a Lord" to "as drunk as a Heaven," in pursuance of a rule, now fallen into disuse, that Heaven should always be substituted for the name of any of the Persons of the Trinity. Mr. Redford's immediate predecessor, refusing to license a translation of a French play, on the ground that the heroine, a married woman, had been guilty of an indiscretion in early life, was visited by the actress cast for the part, who naturally used all her powers of persuasion to induce him to

revoke his decision. Finally he consented, on condition that the words "I sinned but in intention" were introduced into her part. Accordingly, every night, during the burst of welcome which hailed her first entrance in the piece, the actress remarked confidentially to the conductor of the band, "I sinned but in intention," and thereby rescued her country from demoralization by French levity. A little later, a gifted American actress wrote a painfully powerful piece in which a mother, to save her child from growing up a helpless cripple, kills it. To this the Examiner had no objection; but, unfortunately, the mother baptized the child before killing it, a proceeding incompatible with his rules. He refused the necessary license. The American lady, unaccustomed to be so suppressed, swooped down on the Examiner as he sat at breakfast, and demanded an explanation. He soon weakened so far as to ask what, exactly, the lady proposed to do with the infant. She thereupon made a rag baby of his napkin, and, with the help of the hot water from his tea-tray, rehearsed the scene. He admitted its propriety; and she went off in triumph with her license. The very form in which the license is issued provides for these contingencies by excepting such passages as may be endorsed on the back of the certificate.

But Mr. Redford is a sharper man of business than his predecessor. On his refusal to license a certain play of mine, I asked the usual questions as to the particular passages objected to. Mr. Redford replied impressively that, if a new play were submitted to him, he would endeavor to forget having read the former one. This meant that if I would guess the obnoxious passages, and send him another ten dollars and a half, he would tell me whether my guess was right. He thus extracted double fees from me; and if I had required the license for an ordinary production of the play, instead of for a mere copyrighting formality, it might very well have taken half a dozen minimum guesses at ten dollars and a half apiece to ascertain the exact line drawn by his moral opinions without needlessly going beyond it. As it was, I simply deprived the play of the passages which explained its meaning (the residue being sufficient for my purpose), and so secured my license without further expenditure. This procedure on the part of the Examiner is unquestionably both logical and businesslike. It must increase his fees and economize his work very considerably. No wonder his post, with its fees, its powers,

its unassailable permanence, and its unimpeachable gentility as a post in Her Majesty's household, is much sought after.

The statutory penalty for defying the Censor is a fine of fifty pounds, which can, theoretically, be levied on any person connected with a forbidden performance, call-boy, checktaker, carpenter, bandsman, actor, author, manager, stage-doorkeeper, and who not? No attempt has been made in recent cases to recover this penalty, ostensibly because the department has no funds with which to institute prosecutions, but really, one suspects, because the cases would have to be tried by jury, and the average British juryman, though usually a worm under the foot of the judge, can turn if he likes. Even judges have flashes of the constitutional spirit at odd moments. Here we have the weak place in the Examiner's powers which led to the famous evasion of him on the centenary of Shelley's birth. It was proposed to celebrate that occasion by a performance of "*The Cenci*." The Examiner would not hear of it; but the performance was given for all that in the Grand Theatre, Islington (a northern suburb of London), before an audience of poets, headed by Browning, and a crowd of their disciples. Technically, this performance was not a public representation of the play: it was only a meeting of the Shelley Society. The spectators did not pay at the doors: they had all joined the Shelley Society for the season, and were attending this particular "private" meeting of it in the exercise of their ordinary right as members. For the moment the defeat of the Censor was complete. But the performance had taken place in a London theatre; and London theatres are subject to the Lord Chamberlain, who licenses them from year to year. The unfortunate lessee, having let his house to the Shelley Society (without any knowledge of the plot in hand), found himself at the mercy of the outraged Chamberlain when the time came for renewing his license. What passed between them is not known; but there is now a clause in the lease of that theatre stipulating that no performances of unlicensed plays shall be given in it. When the Shelley Society proposed to repeat "*The Cenci*" some years later, the Lord Chamberlain was master of the situation. With a single revolutionary exception, no manager dared lend or let his theatre for the purpose. The terror was so complete that a manager who, not realizing his risk, had discussed quite favorably the possibility of placing his house at the disposal of the Society, was compelled to

write to the press vehemently denying that he had ever contemplated such an enormity, although his letters were in the hands of the very persons he was publicly contradicting.

Since then, the blockade has been run only by the Independent Theatre, which succeeded in producing Ibsen's "Ghosts" on three occasions without a license. In this case, no license was applied for, its refusal being practically certain; and the first performance, which was technically "private," like that of the Shelley Society, was over before the lessee of the theatre knew that anything exceptional was happening. After this, the theatres were thoroughly on their guard; but, later on, the founder of the Independent Theatre, Mr. Grein, invited his friends (including all the subscribers) to an "At Home," hiring for the purpose one of the numerous halls which are let in London for dances, minor political meetings, lectures and the like. Here he entertained his guests with a second performance of "Ghosts." A third was accomplished some years later, virtually in the same way. No attempt was made by the Lord Chamberlain, on any of these occasions, to enforce the statutory fine, restrain the projectors by injunction, or otherwise assert any right of interference with performances which are not opened to the public by taking money at the doors for admission. But it is evident, from the fact that nothing will now persuade any manager or proprietor of a licensed theatre to allow such a performance to take place in his house, that the power of closing theatres which the Lord Chamberlain wields as the licensing authority, makes him effectively the Tzar of the drama.

To Americans, who, as I have pointed out, are as much concerned in the Censorship as the English are, the drama being practically international, this state of things may seem so Russianly subversive of fundamental western rights as to stand condemned by the mere statement of it. In England, the only question that arises is: How does the institution work? The fact that it violates those Rights of Man which are expressly constitutional in America is to the English mind all in its favor. No doubt the Englishman is earnestly jealous for his religious liberty, and at least excitable about his political liberty. An attempt to force the Salvation Army to have their hymns licensed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the daily papers to have their political leaders licensed by the Queen's Lectrice, would produce an over-

whelming agitation at once; though there is rather more to be said for either measure than for the censorship of the English dramatists by Mr. Redford. But beyond this the Englishman does not go. Far from believing that either he himself or anybody else can be safely trusted with further liberties, he lives absolutely convinced that only by a strenuous maintenance of restrictive laws and customs, supported on every public occasion by the most reverent professions of faith and loyalty, feigned or sincere, can society be withheld from casting all moral considerations to the winds and committing suicide in a general Saturnalia of reckless debauchery. I do not pretend that this will be accepted in England as a sane statement of fact; for, if England were conscious of its own absurdity, it would cease to be absurd. Still less do I mean to suggest that it is a delusion at all peculiar to England or unknown in America. But I am concerned here only with an application of it which *is* peculiar to England. Nobody will deny that the normal assumption in England is that without a Censor the stage would instantly plunge to the lowest practicable extreme of degradation—an assumption quite undisturbed by the fact that Literature, without a Censor, behaves far more decently than Drama with one. For myself, as a dramatic author, I can say that few things would surprise me more than to meet a representative Englishman who regarded my desire to abolish the Censor otherwise than he would regard the desire of a pickpocket to abolish the police. To such an Englishman, it seems the most obvious piece of common sense that some respectable person should be made responsible for the propriety of the plays to which his daughters go; so that he may be guaranteed against the natural propensity of the theatre towards licentiousness. Accepting the court standard of decorousness as absolute, he considers that if a lord who is a member of Her Majesty's household cannot be trusted to decide questions of propriety, nobody can. No competitive examination, no professorship of Dramatic Literature, no control by an elected representative body, could give him any greater sense of security than the position of the Lord Chamberlain. And, I may add, they could give the dramatists no greater sense of security either.

Let us, then, embrace this apparently common-sensible view of the institution, and inquire simply how it fulfils, not its original purpose (it was instituted by Walpole to prevent Fielding from

exposing parliamentary corruption on the stage), but the purpose for which it survives. What sort of plays does it license; and what sort of plays does it suppress? A very conclusive answer to this question would be a description of the most unpleasant play licensed within my experience by Mr. Redford's predecessor, who refused to license "The Cenci," and of the most unpleasant play licensed by Mr. Redford himself. But, fastidious reader, suffice it to say that, were such an answer attempted, the guaranteed morality of the Censor-protected stage would appear as an outrage in the columns of the free Press.

Since the Censorship does not protect the playgoer's daughter from improper plays, it is evident that it either does not protect her at all, or else protects her only from further extremities. But further extremities would be dealt with by the police. The Censor does not prevent either the sexual sensationalists or the mere blackguards from doing their worst on the stage; he only protects them by his certificates.

This is not the fault of the Censor. A moment's consideration will show it to be so inevitable, that if you or I, punctilious reader, were Examiner of Plays, it would not be altered in the least. Let us examine the position. You take a commonplace official; confront him with a play by a man probably cleverer than himself, possibly a genius destined to be remembered for many centuries; and ask him to decide whether the net effect of a performance of that play on the destiny of the human race will be helpful or harmful. The Delphic oracle itself would not have the impudence to pretend that it could answer such a question. Even the Roman Catholic Church does not profess to exercise its censorship without supernatural guidance; and the Roman Catholic Church, which is at least not less qualified for the task than Mr. Redford, has admittedly made serious mistakes both through the Inquisition and in the compilation of its *Index Expurgatorius*; failing to add anything to the natural check of public opinion upon really licentious literature, whilst restricting popular access to the Bible, and missing its mark in the suppression of books so frequently that the placing of a work in the *Index* almost raises a European and American presumption in its favor. But, pray, do not be so unjust as to conclude, because the British citizen thoughtlessly expects Mr. Redford to succeed where a great Church has failed, that Mr. Redford himself puts forward

any such pretension. When Mr. Redford refuses to license Tolstoi's "Dominion of Darkness," for example, he does not refuse on the ground that he, Redford, is a more highminded man, or a philosopher with a greater power of distinguishing the conventions of propriety from the realities of moral evil, or a more disinterested and public-spirited citizen of the world, a deeper seer into the future, a keener observer of the present, a wiser critic of life than Tolstoi. If he took that ground, a shout of laughter from the whole civilized world would be the answer. What Mr. Redford and every such censor does say to Tolstoi (if he has sense enough to understand his own position) is: "You are a much cleverer and, no doubt, a better fellow than I am; and I cannot pretend to criticise you. But I must administer the rules of my office as a judge administers the laws; and your play is against my rules. It may be a very good play; and certainly lots of the plays that are inside my rules are shockingly bad ones; but I can't help that: if I were to discriminate outside my rules I should be setting myself up as a sort of Platonic philosopher-king, which I'm not, and which no official is at all likely to be. I do my best to march with the times, stretching the rules as much as possible, or even dropping one out when it becomes too ridiculous; but I must point out to you that there is one rule that never varies, and never can vary; and that rule is that a play must not be made the vehicle of new opinions on important subjects, because new opinions are always questionable opinions, and I cannot make Her Majesty the Queen responsible for questionable opinions by licensing them. The other rules are simple enough. You mustn't dramatize any of the stories in the Bible. You mustn't make fun of ambassadors, cabinet ministers, or any living persons who have influence in fashionable society, though no notice will be taken of a gag at the expense of General Booth, or a Socialist or Labor member of the County Council, or people of that sort. You mustn't have any love affairs within the tables of Consanguinity in the Prayer Book. If you introduce a male libertine in a serious play, you had better 'redeem' him in the end by marrying him to an innocent young lady. If a female libertine, it will not matter if she dies at the end, and takes some opportunity to burst into tears on touching the hand of a respectable girl. There are lots of little ways in which a play can disclaim any unusual views as to the relations of the sexes, even when it stretches our rules

as to conduct. In farcical comedy and musical farce, you cannot come into conflict with us, because all the fun in them depends on the conventional view of bad conduct. The observance of these rules of ours constitutes a sort of *technique* which is easily picked up, which is in harmony with the common usages of gentlemen, and which is never objected to by anybody but the people who would be disqualified anyhow by having new views—the cranks, in short. That's how our place works. You owe me two guineas, please, for refusing to allow you to produce your play. Thank you. Good morning."

The rules here spoken of are not printed for the guidance of dramatists. They are traditional and probably unwritten. They are not the invention of any individual Censor: they simply codify the present and most of the past prejudices of the class he represents. To write a play which complies with them in form whilst grossly violating their purpose is as easy as lying: it is the trade of the adapter of French farces. To write a play which holds their purpose as sacred as any Examiner can, whilst violating their form in every scene, is as difficult as the achievement of greatness: it is the fate of the man of genius, necessarily always defending humanity against plutocracy and reality against hypocrisy. Each successive Censor makes the best of these rules when he is young and elastic, and the worst of them when he is old and ossified; but, in the main, they bind him as tightly as they bind the public. He may admire "The Cenci," but he dare not license it. He may feel as deeply as Matthew Arnold did the degradation of the English theatre, and may know quite well that English Literature towers high above English Drama, because Literature is subject to no judgment but that of its natural masters, the authors. Not only Matthew Arnold, but Byron and Shelley, Ruskin and Carlyle, Dickens, Thackeray and Mark Twain, Darwin and Mill, Huxley and Tyndall, George Eliot and Sarah Grand, Meredith and Tolstoi—all those, in short, whose eminence makes the roll of acted dramatists so petty by contrast, must have been suppressed by an Examiner of Books, had such an official existed. Mr. Redford cannot help himself: a Censorship cannot work in any other way, until a Censor can be found greater than the greatest dramatists. That being impossible, he is doomed still to put his hall-mark on profligate farces and thinly sentimentalized tom-cat love tales, and to shut the stage door

against the great dramatic poets. For these poets must say to themselves what Carlyle said to himself: "One thing in the middle of this chaos I can more and more determine to adhere to: to clear myself of cants and formulas as of poisonous Nessus shirts; to strip them off me, by what name soever called, and follow, were it to Hades, what I myself know and see." And the Censor must reply: "I really cannot allow you to do anything so ungentlemanly. My instructions are to admit nobody to the stage without a complete Nessus suit on, in which he must make up his mind to face straight for Church Parade in the Park, and turn his back decisively on Hades, no matter what he knows or sees."

And so, in the end, the public gets neither the dramatist's view of life, nor the Examiner's view of life, nor its own view of life, nor in fact any real view of life at all. It does not get a clean stage, simple as that seemed: there is always one theatre, at least, in London where the fun consists of mere blackguardism under a royal certificate of propriety. It does not even get the laws against the exhibition on the stage of very young children enforced: reproachful-eyed babies are still tossed about from hand to hand in lewd farces; and infamous ballets are danced at eleven o'clock at night by tiny children kept awake only by unhealthy excitement. This at least the Censorship might stop; but it never does. No serious steps to make London theatres safe were taken, until the responsibility was transferred to the County Council. Desiring to give a judicial air to this article, I have racked my brains and searched my pretty exhaustive experience as a critic of the theatres to find a single item to the credit of the Censorship's account in the books of the Recording Angel. I find none. Shame, folly, ridicule, and mischief are the fruits of it, and the sole possible ones, as, I repeat, they would equally be if I or Tolstoi himself were Censor. Nobody profits by it except the Examiner, who lives by it, and the Lord Chamberlain, who is occasionally presented by the managers with silver plate, which he publicly accepts as naïvely as those Stuart Masters of the Revels (the original Censors), who entered in their journals the presents made to their wives by the actor-managers of the day.

What, then, is to be done with the Censorship? Nothing can be simpler. Abolish it, root and branch, throwing the whole legal responsibility for plays on the author and manager, precise-

ly as the legal responsibility for a book is thrown on the author, the printer, and the publisher. The managers will not like this: their present slavery is safer and easier; but it will be good for them, and good for the Drama. And transfer the authority to license theatres from year to year from the Lord Chamberlain to the London County Council, which already deals with music halls, and is jealously criticised by the Press and the electorate.

Alas! when we pass from the What to the How, the simplicity of the problem vanishes. Some years ago, when the London Playgoer's Club invited my opinion as to how the Censor could be got rid of, I had to reply that, as far as I could see, nothing short of abolishing the monarchy could touch him. But we are not going to burn down our house to roast our pig in that fashion. Besides, nobody, except Mr. William Archer and a few dramatists whose plays have been suppressed, seems to object to the Censorship. There are no complaints in Parliament, none in the Press, no petitions from the Society of Authors or from the managers. A forgotten Royal Commission on the subject came to the unimpeachable conclusion that a perfect censorship is a desirable thing; and the consensus among the manager-witnesses as to the superhuman personal qualities of their master, the then Examiner, quite outweighed the display of petulant shallowness made by that gentleman when he was invited to shine on the Commission in person. The public is either satisfied or indifferent, because the class in England which feels social matters deeply does not go to the theatre, and the class which does go wants to be amused there, and not edified or conscience-stricken. There is no money in the question, no vote-catching power, no popular interest in or knowledge or comprehension of it, and consequently no political capital to be made out of it. The censorship will probably outlive the House of Lords and the supremacy of the Established Church, as quietly as it has outlived the Metropolitan Board of Works and the Irish Church. In England this article will be entirely wasted: no English editor has ever dreamt of asking me to deal with the subject. In America, it may be useful, in view of the likelihood of attempts to set up State Censorships in that country. In which case, O my friends across the sea, remember how the censorship works in England, and DON'T.

G. BERNARD SHAW.